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ABSTRACT

A reading activities survey as part of the Targeted Research and Development Reading Program was done by interviewing 3,504 adults, aged 16 years or older, selected by area probability sampling. Among the preliminary findings was that the most frequent type of reading is newspaper reading. Seven out of 10 people read or look at a newspaper during a typical day, and they spend an average of about one-half hour with it. Most reading time is spent on the main news, local news, and comics. The most frequently given reasons for reading newspapers are to obtain general information, to obtain specific information, and to obtain another view on issues. Socioeconomic status of the newspaper readers or nonreaders is not markedly different. However, higher socioeconomic status is often connected to reading more than one paper, reading newspapers at work, and with reading editorials, letters to the editor, sports sections, and movie, book, or other reviews. Almost all respondents reported reading something while shopping, most often to find specific information. About 4 percent of the respondents were classified as nonreaders; one-half of these nonreaders were visually handicapped, one-fourth were foreign language readers, and one-fourth were illiterate. (AW)

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READING ACTIVITIES OF AMERICAN ADULTS[1]

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One of the objectives of the Targeted Research and Development Reading Program, which is sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education, is to develop a collection of real-life reading tasks that could be used to assess adult literacy. The initial step in meeting this objective was the completion of a comprehensive survey of adult reading activities. It was assumed that in order to construct appropriate adult reading tasks for the assessment of literacy or functional literacy, there is a need to determine what is being read and how reading fits into people's pattern of daily activities. Adults encounter reading demands in their work, recreation and other activities which are part of the way they live. Typical examples of reading demands are a housewife reading a recipe, a service station attendant reading directions on a packaged product, a technician reading an operating manual, a truck driver reading road signs, and an unemployed person filling out an application form for a job. The meaning of functional literacy can be clarified by knowing the context in which reading occurs as well as the social, economic, and personal characteristics of the reader and nonreader.

The Reading Activities Survey is a study of what a nationally representative sample of adults, age 16 and older, read during the course of a typical day. The survey attempts to answer a number of questions about the reading habits of Americans. What are the purposes served by different kinds of reading? Which ones are viewed as important? How much time is spent on various types of reading activities? How does the amount and kind of reading relate to occupation, level of education, income, and other relevant personal characteristics? How do nonreaders cope with life's reading demands?

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[1] Paper presented at the annual American Educational Research Association Convention, April 4, 1972, Chicago, Illinois.

Preliminary results of the survey have been obtained from interviews with a national sample of 3,504 adults. The respondents were selected in accordance with the principles of modern area probability sampling. Institutionalized adults, such as those in hospitals and prisons, as well as those who could not orally communicate with the interviewers were not included in the sample.

In the course of the interviews, respondents who stated that they could read newspaper headlines in the English language were asked whether they read newspapers, magazines, books, or mail on the previous day. Respondents who indicated that on the previous day they had a meal, worked, worked around the house, were at school, traveled or commuted, went shopping, engaged in club or church activities, attended theater or sport events, or engaged in other recreational or free time activities were asked what they had read in the course of these general daily activities. Thus, a highly detailed and comprehensive description of all printed matter that is read or looked at during a day has been obtained.

About four percent of the respondents stated that they could not read newspaper headlines in the English language. These were classified as nonreaders. About half of the nonreaders were visually handicapped, one-fourth were foreign language readers, and one-fourth were illiterate.

Although it is impossible to present even a fraction of the preliminary survey results in the limited time available here, several examples of the findings will be discussed.

The most frequent type of reading reported by the respondent sample is newspaper reading. Seven out of ten people read or look at a newspaper during a typical day and spend an average of about a half an hour with it. The part of the newspaper receiving the highest readership is main news, first page, and headline, followed by local news,

women's or society pages, editorials and letters to the editor, comics, sports, regular ads, classified ads, TV-Radio program listings, movie, book or other reviews and obituaries. Each of these newspaper parts account for more than 10 percent readership.

The amount of time spent in reading the various parts of the newspaper generally varies directly in relation to the percentage of people reading the various parts. That is, the higher the percentage of people reading a particular part, the greater the likelihood that they would spend a relatively long time reading it. Seven out of ten people spend five minutes or more reading the main news while five out of ten read the local news for this period of time. Considerably less time is spent on the other newspaper parts.

In general, the more time spent on a newspaper part, the greater is the importance attached to it. The main and local news are considered very important to many readers, while the other newspaper parts are generally considered of moderate importance only. The only exception was the comics section which was thought to be of low importance by most respondents in spite of the fact that more than half read this section and half of these readers read it for five minutes or more.

The most frequent reason given for reading the various newspaper parts is the desire to obtain general information (to find out what's going on, to have something to do, to see if someone I know is in there), followed by the need for specific information (to see what new jobs are available, to see what they have in clothes and new styles, to learn new recipes). The only exception is the reason for reading editorials and letters to the editor which is primarily to obtain another view on issues.

The socioeconomic status of those who do or do not read newspapers is not markedly different. Those who read two or more newspapers generally have a higher socioeconomic status than those who read only one. Those who read newspapers at work have a higher socioeconomic status than those who read newspapers at home. Higher socioeconomic

status is also associated with those who read editorials and letters to the editor, the sports section, and movie, book or other reviews.

Let us examine another category of reading, that which occurs while shopping. Slightly more than one out of three persons report shopping on any given day. Almost all of them report reading something while shopping and spend an average of seven minutes in reading. About four out of five shoppers read price, weight, or size information while two out of three read writing or labels of packages. Advertising displays and notices or signs are read by about half of the shoppers while checkbooks or credit cards and sales or other forms are read by approximately one out of five shoppers.

The major reason for reading while shopping is to find some specific information. The only exceptions were notices or signs and advertising displays which just caught the eye of the majority of shoppers. Most shoppers felt that reading while shopping is very important. The few people who did not report reading while shopping had a lower socioeconomic status than those who reported reading.

How do nonreaders cope with life's reading demands? They do not seem to adjust very well. The socioeconomic status of nonreaders is extremely low. The single most frequently mentioned item that nonreaders wish they could read is the Bible. One out of four nonreaders related a recent event that made them wish they could read. The following statements are illustrative of the kinds of events that were reported:

> "I had a friend die and I wanted to read a prayer."
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> "I wanted to read the magazine at work while I eat my breakfast and I can't do that; I get so lonely. I live by myself and reading could pass the time for me."
>
> "Every day something happens that makes me wish I could read."

"Have a Bible wish I could read, also a doctor book that was given to me."

In conclusion, by knowing what is read, by whom, for what purpose, the amount of time spent on reading, and the importance attributed to reading, a clearer understanding of functional literacy can be gained. Guidance is also provided in the development of real-life reading tasks that could be used in the assessment of adult literacy.